

# Uncovering the Grade

A LOOK INTO LOUISIANA'S SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM







All Louisiana citizens remember their time at school. We spend our formative years making friends, playing sports, and discovering our strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, for thousands of Louisiana students, the experience of growing up is overshadowed by attending a failing school. But what does it mean to be a student in one of the 124 Louisiana schools that received a performance score of an “F”? Louisiana’s School Accountability System is designed to answer that question. It is a tool parents can use to evaluate the educational options available to their children.



## Louisiana’s Accountability System

Accountability is the bedrock of all education reforms in the United States. Testing and understanding the progress of students within a school illuminates the effectiveness of the curriculum and, in part, the instruction at the school level. Louisiana has had nearly three decades of experience in developing and refining its accountability system, long before federal law required it. Starting with the Foster administration, Louisiana tracked the performance of its schools to identify districts that required additional resources to overcome challenges that manifested at the classroom level. Since then, two major federal laws were passed that focus on education reform in the classroom by requiring states to assess students through annual exams. President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA), and President Barack Obama’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), required the use of standardized tests to track student performance.



Louisiana took the federal requirements a step further with its own accountability measurement, of which standardized testing is one part. The purpose of Louisiana's accountability system is to:

1. Require and support student achievement in each public school;
2. Provide assurance to the citizens that the quality of education in each public school is monitored and maintained at levels essential for each student to receive a minimum foundation of education;
3. Provide clear standards and expectations for schools and school systems so that assessment of their effectiveness will be understood; and
4. Provide information that will assist schools and school systems in order that energies and resources may be focused on student academic achievement.<sup>1</sup>



With this statute as a framework, the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) and the Louisiana Department of Education (LDoE) set a goal that by 2025,

Louisiana's K-12 education system will ensure students are ready for the next level of study, give all students access to the same opportunities as their peers across the country, require comprehensive support for struggling schools and groups of students, and provide families and communities with an accurate picture of school, center, and system performance quality.<sup>2</sup>

In short, Louisiana is committed to improving the state of education and the transparency of its school systems by the year 2025. The state also set higher standards that will gradually increase until mastery is required for an "A" rating by the year 2025.<sup>3</sup> Currently, students in "A"-rated schools meet the basic bar.





# What Makes the Grade?

Organizations can use a myriad of student outcomes to analyze the effectiveness of a school. **This report will focus on the metrics Louisiana uses to assign a grade and score within its accountability system.**

Annually, Louisiana public schools receive a School Performance Score (SPS) that ranges from 0 to 150 points. The grade ranges that are reflected in the graphic below were intended for the 2019-2020 school year. This scale will gradually increase, making it more difficult for a school to receive an “A” grade as LDoE raises its standards over the next four years. The formula for an SPS depends on whether the school is an elementary, middle, or high school campus. The 150 points are calculated differently in each school to reflect the type of learning and assessments that happen within the grade levels.<sup>4</sup>

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

70% LEAP 2025

25% VAM

5% STUDENT INTEREST AND OPPORTUNITY ▲

Seventy percent of an elementary school’s grade is based on students’ performance on the annual LEAP 2025 test. Students are assessed in the core subjects of Math, English Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science. Twenty-five percent of the SPS is based on student growth. Student growth measures progress towards Mastery on the LEAP 2025 assessment and compares student performance to that of similar peers year-to-year using a Value-Added Model (VAM) score. The VAM formula includes a system of weights used to accommodate learning disabilities, socioeconomic status, and behavioral issues; it can also be adjusted to measure high-performing students’ growth. Additionally, VAM scores are one component of a teacher’s annual evaluation.<sup>5</sup> The final five percent is calculated for student interest and opportunity, an ESSA mandated addition. This score takes into consideration options the school provides for students to excel, such as STEM education.

## MIDDLE SCHOOLS

65% LEAP 2025

25% STUDENT GROWTH

5% STUDENT INTEREST AND OPPORTUNITY ▲  
5% STUDENT DROP-OUT CREDIT ACCUMULATION INDEX ▲

Similarly, the accountability metrics for middle and combination schools (schools with grades K-8) are largely made up of annual LEAP 2025 assessments. Sixty-five percent of the score is made up of the students' proficiency in the core subjects assessed in the LEAP 2025 assessment. Identical to elementary schools, 25 percent is based on the student growth calculation. The final 10 percent is broken into two categories: five percent for student interest and opportunities, and five percent for the student drop-out credit accumulation index, which measures course credits accumulated by the end of ninth grade to keep students on track for graduation.

## HIGH SCHOOLS

25% ASSESSMENT INDEX

25% ACT OR WORKKEYS

25% STRENGTH OF DIPLOMA

20% COHORT GRAD RATE

5% INTEREST AND OPPORTUNITY SCORE ▲

High school is where the SPS formula becomes more complex. Twenty-five percent of the high school's grade is based on a combination of student performance on End of Course Exams (EOC) and the student growth calculation. This combined metric is known as the "Assessment Index." Twenty-five percent of a high school's SPS is based on student performance on either the ACT or WorkKeys assessment. The ACT is a well-known college admission test that predicts students' readiness for post-secondary studies. WorkKeys is a career aptitude test that is usually taken in lieu of the ACT. The third segment, which also comprises twenty-five percent of a school's SPS, is the strength of diploma that students earn. Students can earn credentials that are added to a basic diploma and earn points for Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses, dual enrollment, or earning an Associate's Degree. The final 25 percent is divided between a 20 percent cohort graduation rate, which examines the amount of time it takes a student to graduate, and a five percent interest and opportunity score.





# COVID-19's Impact on School Accountability



2020 was an unprecedented year for education delivery across the United States. Louisiana was no exception. In March 2020, Governor John Bel Edwards signed a proclamation<sup>6</sup> closing all schools to contain the spread of COVID-19, as did many governors and education leaders across the country. **In the rush to switch to online learning, many students had no contact with school systems and limited, if any, instruction for several months.**

In response to the COVID-19 disaster, Louisiana applied for a waiver of its assessment, accountability, and reporting requirements under ESSA. On March 20, 2020, the United States Department of Education approved Louisiana's waiver request. Due to the school closures and the waiver from the U.S. Department of Education, Louisiana did not require standardized testing for the 2019-2020 school year.

As discussed in detail above, state assessments are a major portion of both elementary and middle school SPS. **Due to the lack of assessments and the federal waiver, LDoE will not be issuing School or District performance scores and letter grades for the 2019-2020 school year.** Instead, all school and district accountability metrics will remain static from the 2018-2019 scores. LDoE will continue to update the LDoE Data Center site with other student performance metrics that were collected and available from the 2019-2020 school year, such as Cohort Graduation Rates, Jump Start Credentials, and ACT information. However, these metrics will not be used to officially provide schools and districts with updated scores and letter grades.

# 2020-2021 Accountability System

With districts all choosing their own way of reopening, how would Louisiana education leaders ensure that students were prepared to take LEAP 2025 assessments?



The phased reopening of schools beginning in August 2020 raised questions about measuring accountability. With districts all choosing their own way of reopening, how would Louisiana education leaders ensure that students were prepared to take LEAP 2025 assessments? Former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos announced that the U.S. Department of Education would not issue any waivers for the 2020-2021 school year; however, a decision from the new administration has not yet been announced. **Regardless of the new administration's policy, Louisiana should administer LEAP 2025 assessments to gather critical data about how our students are doing, identify the extent of learning gaps, and use the data to guide interventions in the next school year.**

In September 2020, the Louisiana Accountability Commission convened to discuss the status of accountability in the 2020-2021 school year. The

LDoE announced that it has every intention of administering the LEAP 2025 assessment for the 2020-2021 school year. The Commission, which is charged with making accountability policy recommendations to BESE, noted that one of the challenges to providing up-to-date accountability data is not having the previous year's LEAP 2025 scores. Previous year scores on LEAP 2025 are used to calculate the student growth component and VAM scores are used for teacher evaluations. The commission recommended utilizing a "skip-year" model using LEAP 2025 scores from 2019 to address the lack of scores from the 2019-2020 school year. For students who also have 2018 and 2017 test scores, those may be considered in the model as well. Because some testing data is available for many Louisiana students, the commission recommended using the data to provide a partial update of accountability scores for 2021. The commission recommended using





Families,  
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and education  
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performing.

2019's LEAP 2025 scores (as well as 2018 and 2017 scores, if available), to produce "growth to mastery" targets, and using "skip-year" methodology to calculate student VAM results for inclusion in school and district accountability for 2020-2021. BESE approved these recommendations for the 2020-2021 school year in October 2020.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, **the Louisiana legislature passed two bills to address the 2020-2021 accountability dilemma during the second extraordinary session, held in late 2020.** Rep. Chuck Owen's bill authorizes BESE to use value-added model assessments and school-level test data in calculating school and district performance scores. This statute also requires the state superintendent of education to present the assessment results to the House and Senate Committees on Education, and to prepare a waiver to the U.S. Department of Education, if he believes that the issuance of letter grades would be detrimental to the state.<sup>8</sup>

Sen. Cleo Fields' bill prohibits the use of student assessments and testing data for evaluating teacher performance or making placement decisions for fourth and eighth grade students for the 2020-2021 school year. It also prohibits the use of value-added data to evaluate teacher performance and effectiveness for 2020-2021.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, there has been discussion of curving the letter grades assigned to schools for 2020-2021 to account for the challenges posed by the continuing COVID-19 epidemic. This would be a mistake. Families, taxpayers, and education policymakers deserve to know the truth about how schools are performing. Only by providing accurate information can parents make the best decisions for their children, and educators can direct resources to schools in need of an intervention. Facing these truths head-on will allow Louisiana to continue to make progress towards mastery.

# Principles of an Effective Accountability Policy

We discussed the component parts of Louisiana's accountability policy. Now, let's take a step back and consider the effectiveness of the SPS. An effective accountability system is a powerful tool to guide decisions made by parents and policymakers. **What type of information does a well-crafted accountability policy include?**

- **No accountability system can perfectly capture differences in children, schools, or communities.**
- Effective accountability systems generate **transparent, meaningful, and actionable information on school performance** for parents and policymakers.
- **High-stakes testing, where its use is supported by data, has a role to play** in providing information that parents, taxpayers, and authorizing and accreditation agencies can use to assess performance and trends. These tests communicate the student's readiness for their next step—the next grade level, graduation, or entry into college or the workplace.
- An effective accountability policy should **identify and target weaknesses at an early stage** before more severe interventions for prolonged underperformance are required.
- Accountability systems should **reflect the state's evolving priorities** and should be used to drive educator behavior accordingly.
- Finally, accountability systems should **inform parents, taxpayers, and policymakers of a school's status and growth**. An accountability score should capture how a school is performing at a moment in time, and whether the school is improving, declining, or stagnant over time.





# Does Louisiana's Accountability System Make the Grade?

How does Louisiana's accountability system measure up to the principles of good accountability policy? Remarkably well. Louisiana's education accountability system is transparent, it empowers parents and stakeholders, and is designed to drive educator behavior. However, there is always room for improvement.

Louisiana is one of 15 states that grades schools on an A-F scale. A letter grade scale conveys transparent, meaningful, and actionable information to parents, administrators, and educators in a way vague labels like “satisfactory” or “needs improvement” cannot. Additionally, using easy to understand letter grades flags schools in need of an improvement plan. A school earning a “D” or “F” for the first time is labeled as “Urgent Intervention Needed” and its weaknesses can be targeted before they take root. Likewise, a grade of “C” signals to parents and community members that resources may be needed to prevent further decline, or to boost student performance in areas ripe for growth.

Further, it is not difficult to find the data used to calculate a school's letter grade. Louisiana School Finder<sup>10</sup>, a transparency tool for families, allows parents to search and compare schools in their area. All the data used to calculate a school's SPS can be found at this site, including school demographics, student progress data, and academic offerings.

Annual state assessments are often criticized for being too burdensome to students and faculty. However, state assessments are the basis on which we build our accountability system. We can uncover the type and amount of learning that is occurring within a school and, to a degree, the classroom itself, from state assessments.

CONTINUED



# Does Louisiana's Accountability System Make the Grade?

CONTINUED

Louisiana is updating its accountability system to reflect the state's evolving priorities and to drive educator behavior. In November 2020, LDoE unveiled plans to update the state's accountability system.<sup>11</sup> The accountability commission proposed new goals to improve student performance in grades K through 12. The proposals include a new focus on improving literacy in grades K through 2. For students in grades 3 through 8, the commission proposed better instruction on background knowledge in English Language Arts and Social Studies courses to improve students' ability to make meaning of full texts. And for high school students, the system will focus on improving career and college readiness for all graduates.

LDoE has already taken steps to better prepare students for life after graduation with the creation of the Fast Forward Program. Students who participate in this program will graduate from high school career- or college-ready by earning an associate degree, completing pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship experience

in a high-demand career, or earning a transfer degree and TOPS University diploma. Future iterations of the SPS should reward student participation in the Fast Forward Program.

Further, the SPS should incentivize schools to expand participation in career- and college-readiness options. In particular, schools should encourage low income and minority students to take advantage of university and technical training diploma paths. Rather than simply rewarding schools for the number of credits earned, the accountability system should measure and reward schools for broadening the pool of students who take advantage of these programs.

Finally, the school accountability metrics should be reviewed periodically to ensure that the programs it incentivizes are aligned with regional workforce needs. This will require LDoE to collaborate with employers, economic development organizations, and other state agencies to determine what skills will be in demand in the future.

**State assessments are the basis on which we build our accountability system.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Louisiana's accountability system is a transparent, easy-to-use tool that empowers parents.

- LDoE should continue using a letter-grade scale for schools to convey transparent, meaningful, and actionable information to parents, administrators, and educators.
- The data used to calculate a school's letter grade should continue to be available at the Louisiana School Finder website.
- Annual state assessments are the foundation for the accountability system and should continue so long as their use is supported by data.
- The accountability system should be evaluated regularly to ensure it continues to reflect the state's evolving priorities.
- LDoE should reward schools for expanding the pool of students who participate in career- and college-readiness diploma options



A photograph of a female teacher with long brown hair, wearing a white and blue striped shirt, smiling warmly at a young boy in a classroom. Other students are visible in the background, and a chalkboard is partially seen.

# Conclusion

Louisiana's School Performance Scores and Louisiana School Finder are valuable tools that can help parents with one of the most important decisions they can make for their child's future—finding a school that fits. These accountability measures also play an important role in ensuring that a Louisiana education is portable throughout the U.S. Every student in Louisiana can perform at just as high of a level as their counterparts across the country. It is up to the adults to continue to provide the resources these students need to attain the lofty goals we set. Overall, Louisiana schools have a lot of work to do over the next few years as LDoE raises the standard for "A" schools to Mastery. However, it is important not to lose sight of the important gains Louisiana students have made over the last decade. **Since 2009, Louisiana's pace of improvement on Math and Reading scores for Fourth and Eighth graders has significantly exceeded national trends.**<sup>12</sup> High standards, quality instruction, and accountability account for this progress, and Louisiana students have shown they can rise to the challenge.

**Expanding and continuing to increase performance standards will move our state and its citizens forward. The Pelican Institute will continue to be a strong supporter of higher standards, increased accountability and transparency for all schools, and giving students the education they deserve.**

# Where Do Louisiana Schools Stand?

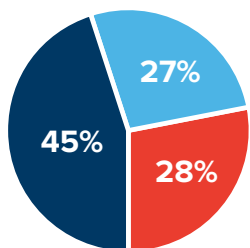
A 2018-2019  
STATEWIDE  
SNAPSHOT

The U.S. Department of Education will not issue waivers for ESSA reporting requirements for the 2020-2021 school year. Therefore, the Louisiana Accountability Commission met in September 2020 to address the challenge of calculating accountability scores without LEAP 2025 data from 2020. The Commission recommended using LEAP 2025 scores from 2019 to provide a partial update on accountability scores for 2021. Below is a snapshot of the data that will be used in part to calculate Louisiana school's accountability scores for 2020-2021. It is important to recognize that Louisiana students were first in the nation for improvement in 8th grade math, and in the top 10 among all states for improvement on each of the four NEAP tests.<sup>13</sup>

## 2019 LEAP 2025 RESULTS<sup>14</sup>

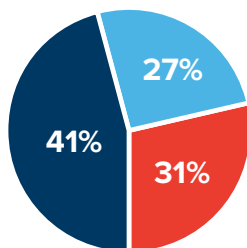
### 4th Grade English

NEAP Ranking:  
**49/52**<sup>15</sup>



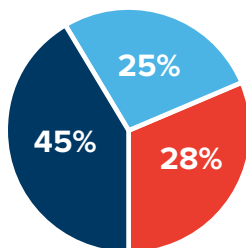
### 4th Grade Math

NEAP Ranking:  
**50/53**<sup>16</sup>



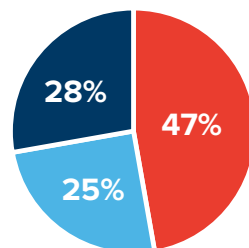
### 8th Grade English

NEAP Ranking:  
**44/52**<sup>17</sup>



### 8th Grade Math

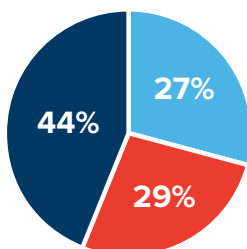
NEAP Ranking:  
**49/53**<sup>18</sup>



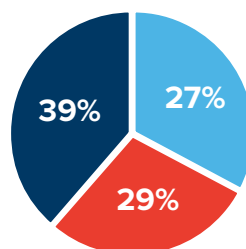
■ Mastery or Above ■ Basic ■ Approaching Basic or Below

## END OF COURSE EXAM<sup>23</sup>

### English 1



### Algebra 1



■ Mastery or Above  
■ Basic  
■ Approaching Basic or Below



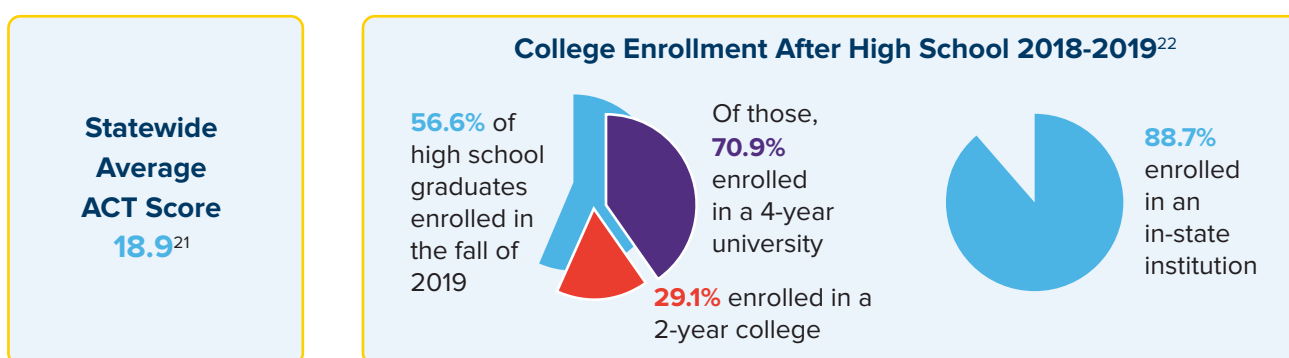
# SCHOOL PERFORMANCE SCORES<sup>19</sup>

## DISTRIBUTION OF GRADE LETTERS



The Department identified a total of 571 schools that required comprehensive or urgent intervention, and school systems were required to submit improvement plans for the 2020-2021 school year. Approximately 45,000 students attend “F”-rated schools in Louisiana.<sup>20</sup>

## COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS



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- 3 Louisiana's Transition to Higher Expectations, available at <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/academics/common-core-state-standards/louisiana-s-transition-to-higher-expectations>.
- 4 Louisiana's K-12 Accountability System, available at [https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/key-initiatives/louisianas-key-initiatives\\_k-12-accountability-system.pdf?sfvrsn=7](https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/key-initiatives/louisianas-key-initiatives_k-12-accountability-system.pdf?sfvrsn=7).
- 5 Value-Added Frequently Asked Questions, available at <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/docs/default-source/teaching/value-added-frequently-asked-questions-list.pdf?sfvrsn=4>.
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- 8 La. Stat. Ann. § 17:24.4(F)(1)(i).
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- 13 Superintendent of Education Releases Statement Regarding Louisiana Students' Achievements on National Assessment of Educational Progress, available at <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/newsroom/news-releases/2019/10/30/superintendent-of-education-releases-statement-regarding-louisiana-students-27-achievements-on-national-assessment-of-educational-progress>.
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